

THE BROOK MEADOW CONSERVATION GROUP

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 3rd October, 2001

THE FIRST CHAIRMAN'S REPORT - 2001

Brook Meadow is a lovely wet meadow of about four and a half acres. It has the River Ems on one side and the Lumley Millstream on the other. It is surrounded by woodland and has 60 superb Crack Willow trees along the river bank. It is full of birds, insects, wild flowers and has Water Voles in the river. And, it is just 100 yards from the town centre of Emsworth. What a marvellous asset we have.

The meadow was purchased by Havant Borough Council in July, 1990. They constructed footpaths and put up two wooden bridges over the river, but did very little with the meadow itself with the result that it became severely overgrown with rank vegetation, such as, nettles, bindweed and willowherb. Not only did this seriously reduce the attractiveness of the meadow and its accessibility, but it also diminished its ecological value and made it look like a site ready for development.

About a year and a half ago, I feared the worst when I read in a local political pamphlet about a proposal to build houses on the meadow. Something had to be done and quickly. We did not want to see another Hermitage-type development here.

This prompted myself and a number of other concerned local residents to get together to form the Brook Meadow Conservation Group. Our aims were to restore, protect and conserve the natural environment of Brook Meadow and its wildlife for the benefit and quiet enjoyment of the people of Emsworth.

There were several priorities. We had to get organised and start to care for the site, we had to gain the support of the local community and we had to get good evidence about the ecological value of the meadow.

Our vision was that the meadow, with proper care and management, could become both an important reserve for wildlife and a place of natural beauty where people would want to walk, sit, picnic and enjoy its openness. It was also our hope that the meadow would, in the future, become a valuable recreational and educational resource for our children.

Over the past year the group has, I believe, made a number of significant advances towards the fulfilment of these objectives.

Setting up the group

We enlisted the assistance of Alison Angel of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers to set up the group. With Alison's help we elected a committee, drafted a Constitution and opened a bank account. With initial publicity we quickly attracted members who paid £3 subscription to join the group. A Programme of Action was drawn up for the year which included monthly committee meetings, monthly workdays and monthly guided nature walks during the summer months.

We also set up a voluntary wardening scheme in which members visited the meadow on at least one day each week to note things that needed doing and to record wildlife.

As a first step towards our educational objectives a visit was made to Emsworth Primary School and information was distributed about the conservation project to parents, teachers and children. We hope to be following this up in the coming year and possibly invite groups of children into the meadow.

We became formally affiliated to the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers from whom we obtained liability insurance for practical work in the meadow. Havant Borough Council were fully supportive of our project. They gave us formal permission to work in the meadow and provided funding over the past year.

Tools and Funding

Thanks to membership subscriptions and a number of generous donations we have assembled an extensive range of tools for use in the conservation project (Frances has more details about this in her report). Our major purchase was a BCS Crusader Power Scythe which we obtained with a grant from the landfill tax. This is a superb machine and has been put to very good use in workdays for cutting and widening paths and creating open areas for birds, plants and other wildlife. Our next major purchase will probably be a strimmer.

Publications

Newsletters are published every two months and are distributed to all members to keep them informed about the progress of the conservation project and about the wildlife that can be seen in the meadow. For those members on e-mail I have also provided a weekly up-date of news from the meadow.

More general publicity has included several articles in The Ems, the Portsmouth News, the Chichester Observer and other smaller publications. Andy Brook has produced a number of leaflets and booklets for distribution to libraries in Emsworth, Havant, Southbourne and Chichester.

In addition, we have a poster in the box in Emsworth Square and posters at all three entrances to the meadow (though sadly these often get torn down).

Logo

Richard Bishop and Frances Brettell joined forces to produce a logo for the group featuring a Water Vole. This logo is now shown on all our publications and Andy also produced a few Brook Meadow T-Shirts complete with logo for sale at the Emsworth Show. We may in time get around to producing other items, such as, mugs.

Conservation training

Conservation training has been an important part of our activities so as to ensure that all practical work on the meadow is conducted responsibly and with proper care for safety. Several members of our group have attended conservation training courses in Risk Assessment, Leadership, Emergency First Aid, Wardenship and the use of strimmers. I am pleased to say we are now able to run our practical workdays without the formal supervision from the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers.

Web page <http://www.brianfellows.clara.net>

We are on the internet. I keep an up-to-date web page on Brook Meadow as part of my own personal web-site. This includes a weekly news up-date, the current Newsletter, minutes of committee meetings, as well as pictures and other information about the meadow and about Emsworth in general.

The Emsworth Show

The group rented a stall at the Emsworth Show this year which we shared with the Friends of Hollybank Woods group. The main aim was to give more local publicity to Brook Meadow and the conservation project, and in this respect it was very successful. We had a constant flow of people visiting the stand and lots of inquiries.

We had displays with pictures of the birds, flowers and butterflies seen on the meadow, as well as information about the group and photos of members hard at work during workdays. Frances Brettell organised two attractive games for children which proved very popular. We had lots of Andy's booklets on display and all of them went by the end of the day, as did 100 membership application forms. Some new members were recruited on the spot. All in all, it was a very enjoyable day and thanks go to Frances Brettell, Debi Morris, Wally Osborne, Sue Pike, Elisabeth Kinloch, Tony Wilkinson and Jane and Andy Brook for help in manning the stall.

Work carried out by Havant Borough Council

Our relationship with Havant Borough Council over the past year has been very good. At our instigation they completed a number of jobs in the meadow, including removal of fallen branches, the clearance of footpaths, erection of a new 5-barred gate at the Lumley entrance, removal of an old trailer, repair of the vandalised North Bridge and erection of a barrier at the end of Seagull Lane to prevent unauthorised access to the site (ie travellers). They also put up

three doggie bins for the convenience of dog owners and two litter bins. A seat and an interpretation board are on the way.

The Havant Plan

I am pleased to say that in the Havant Borough Local Plan, Brook Meadow appears to be reasonably secure. It is marked as a green space on the map of Emsworth and comes under proposal R16 - which involves "the strengthening of existing policies for the protection of open space in urban areas". There is also something in the plan about giving extra protection to SINC's which is good news for us because we are one.

Site of Importance for Nature Conservation

As I have said, one of our prime objectives over the past year has been to establish the ecological value of the meadow and an important step towards this was end its formal designation as a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC). This status not only helps to safeguard the meadow from development, but it also makes our conservation group eligible for advice and grant aid to assist in its management.

We have benefited from this over the past year. We have received valuable advice on management from Debbie Miller who is the Habitat Management Advisor with Hampshire County Council. Debbie has also written a draft management plan for the meadow and organised the big cut which took place this autumn.

The Big Cut

The long-awaited cut and removal of the rank vegetation from the meadow finally took place at the end of August this year. This cut was done fairly early to avoid any bad weather which caused last year's cut to be cancelled.

The cut was carried out by Brian Cull who is an experienced contractor in conservation work. He used two machines, one to cut and shred and the other to rake up the cuttings. The cuttings (or arisings) were stacked neatly along the eastern edge of the meadow where they will quickly rot down.

The immediate effect of the cut is quite dramatic although the vegetation will quickly grow again (it already is!) and we are unlikely to see much change for several years. But, it will be interesting to see what comes up next spring.

Certain areas were left uncut to allow a refuge for wildlife and to maintain late flowering plants for the benefit of insects. Although some small mammals, such as Shrews, did perish during this cut their populations as a whole are unlikely to suffer. Birds had completed their nesting and will not have been affected; in fact, they should benefit from the insects and seeds exposed by the cutting.

The cut was carried out in accordance with Debbie Miller's draft management plan for the meadow and was paid for partly from the SINC Project of Hampshire County Council and partly by Havant Borough Council.

Reactions to the cut have generally been very positive, though there have been a few negative reactions from people who felt we had spoilt the wildness of the meadow. To help allay these fears I pinned up some notices explaining the reasons for the cut, emphasising that the cutting will improve the meadow as a wildlife habitat.

Long-Term Management

With regards to the future, Debbie Miller has told us that the SINC project will not be able to fund cutting of the meadow next year and alternative sources of funding should be investigated. But she thinks the best long-term strategy for the meadow would be grazing by cattle.

Now the meadow has been cut, it would be feasible to get some grazing animals on there once there is adequate regrowth next spring. She suggests we could try some cattle in one area of the meadow for a short period of time to see what the reaction is.

Clearly, we would need to do some PR before hand and ensure that local people are involved in caring for the animals. This is something the group will need to discuss and plan for in the coming months. But it would be nice to see animals on the meadow.

Debbie also tells us about the Hampshire Grazing Project which is a scheme set up by Hampshire County Council to help find graziers willing to graze conservation sites. We shall

need to contact the Grazing Project Officer at HCC and invite him down to look at the meadow and talk through the practicalities of grazing. The good news is that the Grazing Project has a grant fund (similar to the SINC project) which will pay up to 75% of the costs for fencing, water supply, etc.

It is instructive to look at Fishbourne Meadow, which is managed by the Chichester Harbour Conservancy, and which already has an established grazing routine. Anne de Potier tells me it is grazed by 4 docile cattle for 10 weeks from August to October with considerable benefits for vegetation control. There are several public footpaths which criss-cross the meadow and apparently the cattle have posed no problems for walkers.

River bank cutting

The annual cutting and clearance of the river banks by the Environment Agency took place during the second week of August this year. This was earlier than last year, the cutting was done much more sensitively. Before the cutting I spoke to Paul Smith, the conservation officer with the Environment Agency, who explained the policy of the EA towards river bank cutting when Water Voles are present which was basically to retain at least 20% of the bankside vegetation where they are present.

He agreed that a 100% cut of the river banks in Brook Meadow, as happened last year, would certainly not be appropriate. He agreed that the area above the North Bridge where we knew the voles were nesting should not be cut at all and, as for the rest, about a metre of vegetation near the water line should be retained.

Interestingly, Paul also told me about a scheme to reintroduce water voles into Arundel WWT. If this works then we could be in line for some voles in the future!

Water Voles

Of all the wildlife on the meadow the one we prize most is the Water Vole. From being a relatively common sight on river banks 50 years ago, the Water Vole is now the most endangered mammal in Great Britain and in 1997 it was added to the special protection schedule of the Wildlife and Countryside Act making it an offence to interfere with the places where they live.

So, imagine our delight, in the summer of last year, to discover evidence of several water voles living in the banks of the River Ems as it passes through Brook Meadow. We are certainly privileged to have such a rare animal living with us in Emsworth and we must do all we can to protect and conserve it.

We were concerned that we may have lost them following the floods of last winter and the severe cutting-back of the river banks by the Environment Agency. But, the good news is that they are back and this year we appear to have at least three pairs nesting in the river banks. We must do what we can to protect them in future years. To avoid undue disturbance to the Water Voles we have put up notices asking dog owners not to allow their dogs into the river during the breeding season of the water vole, which was April to September. I would be grateful to receive news of any sightings.

Wildlife Surveys

Hampshire Wildlife Trust have conducted two botanical surveys of Brook Meadow over the past 10 years in which they identified a number of old meadow indicators and indicators of saline-influenced communities, including the nationally scarce Divided Sedge. These findings were important in getting the meadow classified as a SINC. During the last two years, with the help of local naturalists, we have been busy extending these surveys and I am pleased to say that I think we now have fairly comprehensive picture of the birds and plants which inhabit the meadow. This should provide a useful baseline against which to judge the effects of our conservation efforts. Copies of the bird and plant lists are available from me.

Birds

A total of 50 species of bird has been recorded on and around the meadow with 13 definitely nesting. Nesting birds include three summer visitors from Africa, Whitethroat, Blackcap and Chiffchaff. A map of their breeding territories is on display. Also nesting around the meadow are many of the common resident birds, such as, Song Thrush, Robin, Dunnock, Blackbird, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Greenfinch and Chaffinch.

The meadow has also been visited by a number of other migrants, including, Nightingale, Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Willow Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher. Little Egret, Kingfisher and Grey Wagtail are also often seen near the river, though they probably breed elsewhere.

To help some of the birds with their nesting we have erected seven nest boxes on trees in the copse by Palmer's Road Car Park. A map showing their locations is on display. Putting the boxes up now gives the birds a chance to explore them in preparation for next year's breeding. We are grateful to Jacky Turner from Compassion in World Farming for the donation of one of the boxes.

Plants

The total number of plants recorded in the meadow over the last two years stands at 198, which includes 12 trees and 41 grasses, sedges and rushes. Most importantly, from an ecological standpoint, is the fact that Brook Meadow has retained many aspects of its original meadow flora and thanks to Pete Selby, the Botanical Recorder for South Hampshire, we have recorded seven so-called 'old meadow indicators'.

Rod Stern of the Bryological Society also paid a visit to the meadow and found over a dozen mosses, including two which are rare in Hampshire and Sussex. All this is excellent news for Brook Meadow and provides further confirmation of its ecological value.

Insects

Our surveys of the insect life of the meadow have not been so comprehensive, we could do with an entomologist to give a hand. However, we have recorded 19 species of butterfly in the meadow over the past two years, including Large and Small Skippers, Clouded Yellow, Small Tortoiseshell, Painted Lady, Peacock, Speckled Wood and Ringlet. In addition, we have some lovely damselflies and dragonflies in the wetter areas and have had lots of beetles, spiders, flies, bees, wasps, hornets and ants, most of which await identification.

Other wildlife

Other wildlife reported on the meadow include a Roe Deer, several sightings of a Red Fox with three cubs, Common Shrews and much evidence of Moles. There are also plenty of Brown Trout in the river in summer and lots of Snails. Finally, I have to mention a rare fungus Agrocybe cylindracea which grows on the stumps of old willow trees. It smells of old wine casks and I can vouch for the fact that it is good to eat.

Thanks

Finally, there are a number of people who deserve our thanks for their contribution to the success of the Group over the past year. In particular, thanks . . .
to Richard Bishop, our Secretary, for preparing agenda and minutes so expertly and generally for helping the group to maintain good management practices.
to Frances Brettell, our Treasurer, for handling the accounts so well and keeping the membership list in order.
to Andrew Brook for his care and expertise in producing all those leaflets and booklets about Brook Meadow.
to Ted and Penny Aylett for their hospitality in allowing us to hold our committee meetings at their house and for looking after our ever-growing collection of tools.
to Fred Portwin for providing a safe house for our power scythe.
to Alison Angell and Charlotte Walker of the BTVC for helping to get the group going and for their advice.
to Debbie Miller of Hampshire County Council for her expert advice on management of the meadow.
to David Sawyer, Mark Wilson and Ian Brewster of Havant Borough Council for their continued help and support, financial and otherwise, during the year.
to Anne de Potier of the Chichester Harbour Conservancy for her advice on management and general support.
and last, but not least, to Ralph Hollins for his many and helpful comments on wildlife issues.

Brian Fellows (Chairman), 11 Bridge Road, Emsworth, PO10 7QU.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 9th October, 2002

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT - 2002

I am very pleased to report on another successful year for the Brook Meadow Conservation Group in our project to manage and conserve this lovely meadow in the centre of Emsworth. Our guiding vision remains, that Brook Meadow, with proper care and management, can become both an important reserve for wildlife and a place of natural beauty where local people will want to walk, sit, picnic and enjoy its openness. It is also our hope that the meadow will become a valuable recreational and educational resource for our children.

COMMITTEE NEWS

The Committee has met once a month throughout the year, usually at Ted Aylett's house, and we thank him and Penny for their hospitality.

Application for Charitable Status

One of the issues we have been engaged with is the possibility of the group becoming a Registered Charity. We are not sure, but given the level of our income, this may be a legal requirement. However, we have decided to take the plunge and apply for charitable status and Tony Wilkinson has been working hard writing a new Constitution for the group as required by the Charity Commission. Copies of the new constitution are available for you to study at your leisure. Tony is not able to be here this evening so Wally will be answering questions later on in the Agenda.

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

An issue Ted Aylett has been pursuing on our behalf over the past year concerns the possible inclusion of Brook Meadow in the Chichester Harbour Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. To us, it makes no ecological sense for the AONB to finish at the A259, which means that while Slipper Millpond is included, both Brook Meadow and Peter Pond are excluded. We haven't got anywhere as yet, but Ted, no doubt will persevere.

People's Places Grant

The most significant piece of funding news of the year was the award of a People's Places Grant managed by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers. Frances Brettell has put a lot of hard work preparing our application for this award and we are very grateful her and to Charlotte Walker. Frances will give more details about this award in her Treasurer's Report.

The Countryside Stewardship Scheme

Another major funding project this year has been the preparation of a discussion document on applying for funding from The Countryside Stewardship Scheme. Richard Bishop and then Wally Osborne have prepared this document which is now being considered by Havant Borough Council who, as landowners, will need to give their approval to the application. The big advantage of being involved in the Countryside Stewardship Scheme is that it would secure the long-term funding of the annual cut over a period of 10 years.

Grazing put off

At this time last year we were seriously considering cattle grazing as a management technique. However, after much thought and discussion we decided not to go ahead with the idea. Charlotte Walker told us that BTCV usually do not recommend that community groups like ours take on grazing. Security and vandalism are obvious problems in an urban setting and the need for constant monitoring can be a large burden for volunteers. It was also felt that fencing would impose undue restrictions on free access to the meadow as a public open space. So, we resolved to stick with the annual cut of removal of vegetation as the best management technique for the meadow.

Resignations

We have had changes in committee personnel in the past year: Richard Bishop resigned as Secretary and Andrew Brook resigned as Publicity Officer. We offer both of them our thanks for all their contributions to the running of the group over the last 2 years. We are also grateful to Wally Osborne for taking over the job of Secretary. Andy has continued to help the group with various practical publicity matters including the printing of Newsletters for which we are grateful. With the committee currently down to 5 members it is pleasing to see that we have three new nominations for committee members which will take the group to a healthy eight members.

We were sorry to lose Debbie Miller, who was our habitat management advisor. Debbie has left her post as the SINC Officer at the Hampshire Wildlife Trust and the Hampshire County Council to take up a new position with the Hampshire Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group. Debbie wrote the management plan for the restoration of habitat of Brook Meadow and also organised a grant from the SINC Project to help fund the first major cut of the meadow last year. We thank her for her contributions to the group and wish her well in her new job. We were also sorry to see Ian Brewster and Mark Wilson leave Havant Borough Council since they were both good friends to the group and very useful Council contacts.

Membership

Frances Brettell will be giving you the current membership picture later, but I think we were all delighted to see membership grow steadily throughout the year. Raising the basic subscription was discussed in Committee, but was rejected on the grounds that such a rise would be likely to deter renewal of membership. Community involvement in the project through membership is more important to us at present than money.

PUBLICITY

Contact with members

As always, a major objective of the group has been to spread the message about Brook Meadow and to keep everyone informed about what is going on. Our own members are kept fully informed about our work in the meadow and its wildlife, either through weekly e-mail reports, or through bimonthly printed Newsletters. Newsletters are now only sent to those members without e-mail to avoid unnecessary duplication. The weekly e-mail news updates are also sent to other friends and advisors, which we hope will help to raise the profile of Brook Meadow in the wider professional field of conservation.

Articles and leaflets

More general publicity during the year has included three articles on Brook Meadow in The Ems and short piece for the local Newsletter of the Hampshire Wildlife Trust. One of our members, John Briggs, also wrote a nice article on Brook Meadow for the 'Hampshire County Magazine'. Andy Brook organised two newspaper articles the water voles of Brook Meadow. As before, we have also made full use of leaflets and booklets which have gone to local libraries and to other people and organisations who might be interested. We have a regular poster on the notice board in Emsworth Square.

Talks to local groups

I have given talks on Brook Meadow to the Emsworth Methodist Ladies Group and to the Waterside Community Group. There was a good level of interest shown at both talks and we received donations for the group's funds plus a few new members.

Metroguard Sign-cases

The most important development under the heading of publicity in the past year was the installation of two Metroguard sign cases. These were Ian Brewster's parting gift to the group before he left Havant Borough Council. They are strong cases in which we are able to display posters and photographs giving details of all the meadow news, group events and wildlife observations. I try to keep them up-dated on a weekly basis. One is near the North Bridge and the other near the Lumley Gate. A third board is planned for the South Gate. Despite dire warnings they have not, as yet, been touched by vandals.

Web Site

Brook Meadow is firmly established on the internet, giving us potential world-wide publicity. I keep an up-to-date Brook Meadow section on my personal web site (<http://www.brianfellows.clara.net/>) and Andy Brook is currently taking this one step further by setting-up a new web site for us on Hampshire County Council's web server (<http://www.hants.org.uk/brook-meadow/index.html>). So, watch this space, as they say.

TOOLS AND EQUIPMENT

The Power Scythe which we obtained last year with a grant from the landfill tax has been well used on workdays, particularly to cut the "community area" in front of the seat and to keep casual paths open.

In the past year we have made several other purchases including a STIHL brushcutter, partly funded by the Council and Frances Brettell, Wally Osborne and Andy Brook have attended a training course to learn how to use the machine properly.

We have also purchased 3 pairs of waders mainly for use by Graham Ault and Fred Portwin who have taken on the tasks of keeping the River Ems and the Lumley Stream clear of rubbish. The waders were also used during the recent water vole survey. Finally, Frances Brettell purchased a very nice gazebo which we have already made very good use of both for the Nature Hunt and for the Emsworth Show.

EVENTS IN THE MEADOW

Workdays and guided walks

Regular group workdays are held twice a month through the year. We usually get between 5 and 10 members turning up and the main jobs have included clearing logs, branches and other debris from the river, litter-picking, clearing footpaths and cutting the 'community area' immediately in front of the new seat. We hope that regular cutting of this area will create a pleasant grassy site for families and children, as well as providing a convenient place to hold community events, like the nature hunt. My monthly nature walks have been less well attended with, at the most, 4 or 5 people attending, but that was OK.

Nature Hunt

Certainly, the biggest and most successful event of the year was the Nature Hunt on 12th May which was our contribution to Havant's "Nine Days in May" festival. About 25 families took part in the nature hunt with up to 100 people in total visiting the meadow. Many members worked hard to make the event a success, in particular, Frances Brettell who organised the event and devised the nature hunt questions. Thanks also to Debi Morris, Helen Hitchings, Debbie Robinson, Graham Ault and Jill Meesom for supervising the hunt, to Penny Aylett and Jean Fellows for keeping youngsters well supplied with drinks and biscuits and to Pat and Graham Walsgrove for their help in putting up the gazebo. The Nature Hunt was featured in a short article in The Portsmouth News on Monday May 13 which also included a nice photo of one of the families who took part.

Herb walk

Another successful event attended by 33 people was the Herb Walk on 27 June led by Steve Taylor, a herbalist at the Medicine Garden in Emsworth. Again, we have to thank Frances Brettell for organising this event which brought so many local people into the meadow. We hope this will be repeated.

Other general walks

Other walks led by myself included one on 24th July for about 20 members of the Hampshire Wildlife Trust and another on 8th September for the St Aubin-Emsworth Twinning Association at which over 30 people attended.

CHILDREN IN THE MEADOW

We have been pleased to have some visits from children's groups over the past year.

Wildlife Watch

On 9th February we had a visit from Sally Church and the Havant Branch of Wildlife Watch. This is the junior section of the Hampshire Wildlife Trust. Five children with parents and

leaders attended with litter picking and clearance of branches from a fallen tree being the main jobs. The children clearly loved the experience and a further visit has been arranged for 13th October, so let's hope this becomes a regular event.

The Brownies

Then, on the evening of 16th September I was delighted to lead a group of 24 girls and their leaders from the 4th Emsworth Brownie Group through the meadow, in part preparation for their Conservation Badge. I told them about our Water Voles and explained what we were doing to conserve the meadow and its wildlife. When invited to explore it for themselves the children literally 'exploded' over the meadow in a blaze of yellow and brown tunics, returning with collections of tiny snails and such like. It was a very nice experience.

Schools

As yet, our local schools have not taken any serious interest in Brook Meadow, but in June I was delighted to meet a party of schoolchildren and their teachers from a school in Chidham, walking through the meadow, making notes on what they saw. I explained to them about the work of the conservation group and gave them some leaflets. It would be very nice to see groups of children from local schools taking advantage of this wonderful natural resource they have on their doorsteps. We have already made contact with both primary schools in Emsworth but no school-based activities have taken place in the meadow as yet.

SEMINAR ON WATER VOLES

Another important event hosted by the Brook Meadow Conservation Group was the seminar on Water Voles on 18th July in the Emsworth Community Centre which attracted 35 people. The main speakers were Graham Roberts and Clare Bishop of the Hampshire Wildlife Trust. Clare also got the names of number of volunteers to carry out a water vole survey of the River Ems. Paul Smith of the Environment Agency also spoke on the delicate balancing act the Agency has to maintain between flood protection and conservation. However, he stressed that they were now taking the conservation of Water Voles very seriously.

MEADOW VISITOR SURVEY

We thought it was about time we knew how many people were using Brook Meadow so on Saturday 27 July we conducted a survey of people visiting the meadow between 8am and 8pm. Wally Osborne organised the survey has produced a comprehensive summary of the findings with charts. In the 12 hours 109 people passed through the meadow, of which 43 came with dogs. We hope to repeat the survey at a different time of the year. This type of information will be important evidence for any future claims for funding.

THE EMSWORTH SHOW

As we did last year, the Brook Meadow Conservation Group booked a stall at the Emsworth Show on Bank Holiday Monday 26th August. We had lots of visitors to our stall, including many old friends and familiar faces, including David Willetts our local MP who said how much he appreciated reading our weekly news missives to brighten up his days in his office in the House of Commons. During the show we gave out over 100 membership leaflets, enrolled 12 new members and had several membership renewals. Frances's "Find the Water Vole" game again attracted many younger visitors who all left with a prize. A special thanks to Graham and Pat Walsgrove for erecting the gazebo and to Debbie Robinson for constructing the banner. Thanks also to the following for their help on the stall during the day: Frances Brettell, Tony Wilkinson, Elisabeth Kinloch, Debi Morris, Debbie Robinson, Graham Ault, Jill Meesom, Tony Wootton and Jean Fellows.

THE ANNUAL CUT

The weather remained fine for the annual cut of the meadow which Brian Cull carried out from 20th to 22nd August. This is the main management task for the meadow and needs to be done every year in late summer to discourage rank vegetation and allow the more delicate flora to develop. As before, certain areas were left uncut to allow a refuge for wildlife and to maintain late flowering plants for the benefit of insects. Brian commented on how different the meadow

looked from last year, with generally lower and more varied vegetation, making it much easier to cut. The cost of this year's cut was met largely by Havant Borough Council. As before, the cuttings were piled up along the eastern edge of the meadow. But this was not the end of the story, for a couple of weeks after the end of the cut I had a phone call from Helen Hitchens to say that one of the piles of cuttings was on fire. She phoned the fire brigade and it took 8 firemen 2 hours to put out the blaze. The problem was that the fire started inside the piles due to spontaneous combustion. I had a bit of a lecture from the chief fire officer who told me to remove the piles. I was able to get a band of willing helpers together on the next workday to break up and spread the piles of cuttings to make them safe. Where to put the cuttings next year is something we shall have to give some thought to.

ANNUAL RIVER CLEARANCE

The annual river clearance of the River Ems by the Environment Agency was carried out on 1st October with Frances Brettell and Clare Bishop in attendance to make sure the work was being done in accordance with instructions. The workers did a very good job, leaving all the west bank uncut, plus some vegetation in channel. Next year they will probably just cut the other bank. Clare was really pleased because they took into account our Water Vole survey results which she hopes will set the standard for future work on the Ems.

ENVIRONMENT MATTERS

We have seen a number of environmental improvements to Brook Meadow over the past year. The best one being the new seat on the raised pathway overlooking the main meadow. We have to thank David Sawyer of Havant Borough Council for this. Also, at our request David has agreed to install a picnic table on the new "community area" – the cost of which will be met 50-50 by the council and the group. Also, at our instigation, the Council fixed wire netting on the approaches to the South Bridge which get slippery in wet weather. Before he left the council Ian Brewster planted 30 Alder Buckthorn trees in the meadow which, as well as enhancing the environment, should help to support the Brimstone butterfly.

I am pleased to report that there have been no serious acts of vandalism on the site during the last year. The worst to occur was the up-ending of a dog bin which I managed to replace with no difficulty. The only other problem was the regular building of mini-bridges on the river using pallets from the Palmer's Road industrial units, but Graham Ault quickly dismantles them so no serious damage is done. Is it too soon to hope that we are creating the sort of environment where vandalism is seen as not appropriate?

Dog mess remains a problem, but again I think we are winning. There is much less fouling than a year ago and all 3 dog bins are being well used and, I am pleased to say, regularly emptied by the council workers. Litter is another problem, but we try to keep on top of it. We have two litter bins and will probably need another when the picnic table goes up.

WILDLIFE OF BROOK MEADOW

Water Voles

Of all the wildlife on the meadow the one we prize most is the Water Vole. This year the group took part in two water vole survey organised by Clare Bishop of the Hampshire Wildlife Trust. Each time we discovered many signs of their presence all along the River Ems as it passes through Brook Meadow. We have also received many sightings of them in the river, one lady actually reported seeing 6 at one time.

We did have a scare early in the year when Richard Bishop witnessed a dog killing a Water Vole and this prompted us to put up notices asking dog owners to keep their dogs out of the river. But this had the effect of antagonising dog owners who have traditionally allowed their dogs to exercise in the river, so we need to tread carefully. Maybe, dogs are not such a serious threat to the voles?

Someone at last year's AGM asked about Water Shrews. In the first Water Vole survey Clare Bishop did find a small dropping which could have been from a Water Shrew, but I have not had that confirmed.

Birds

This year a total of 40 birds were recorded on and around Brook Meadow from a total meadow list over the past 3 years of 55 species. I think about 15 of these have nested, including our

three summer visitors. In late April, 6 Whitethroat were singing around the meadow, but I think only 3 actually stayed. I saw one pair with 4 fledged youngsters in early June. We also had 4 Blackcap and 3 Chiffchaff singing in the spring.

Most of the common residents seemed to be actively breeding, including Collared Dove, Woodpigeon, Moorhen, Wren, Dunnock, Robin, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Carrion Crow, Chaffinch, Greenfinch and possibly Great Spotted Woodpecker.

Little Egret and Grey Heron were frequent visitors to the river where a Kingfisher was also often seen. Kestrel and Sparrowhawk often hunted over the meadow and a Buzzard was occasionally seen soaring.

I am not sure whether our nest boxes were used, but I hope to persuade someone from Havant Borough Council to clean them out this winter.

Butterflies

21 species of butterfly have been recorded on the meadow so far this summer. Newcomers have included Common Blue and Small Heath, but there has been no sign of Marbled White this year. It has been a particularly good year for Small Tortoiseshells, Gatekeepers and Large Whites and Peacock, Comma, Painted Lady and Red Admiral have been outstanding in quality. A Clouded Yellow was also seen on one occasion. We had our regular visit from Ringlets in early July, but they did not stay long. Hopefully they found somewhere to breed in the long grass.

Other insects

We have not managed anywhere near a full survey of all the other insects on Brook Meadow, but a variety of moths, ladybirds, dragonflies, damselflies, beetles, froghoppers, bees, wasps, flies, grasshoppers, crickets, ants and spiders have been recorded. Banded Demoiselles have probably been the prominent of these other insects.

Plants

The total number of flowering plants recorded on Brook Meadow in the past 3 years now stands at a magnificent 238 which is 30 more than this time last year, including 3 more sedges. Clearly, we are moving in the right direction, though it is too early to claim the increases are due to our conservation project. The grand total includes 158 herbs, 32 trees and shrubs, 29 grasses, 13 sedges, 5 rushes and 1 horsetail, but I bet there are others which have been missed or overlooked. There are about 20 that I have not been able to find this year. Included in this list are 7 old meadow indicators which indicate that Brook Meadow has retained many aspects of its original meadow flora. I am hoping we shall be able to map these and others interesting plants in the coming year. On the negative side we are keeping a close watch on the patch of Japanese Knotweed on the west bank of the river near the gasholder to make sure it does not spread onto the meadow.

Other wildlife

We have had several sightings of a family of foxes and a stray Roe Deer has been spotted on a couple of occasions. There are always lots of molehills and bats (from Helen Hitchens loft) can often be seen flying around the river at dusk.

The streams have been full of fish and locals tell me that they have never seen so many Trout in the river as this year which is probably an indication of the good quality of the water. Fred Portwin is concerned about the effects of fishing and has found several injured fish in the Lumley Stream and has even heard that Trout have been sold to local fishmongers!!

Generally, we do not have much fungi on the meadow, but we do have one rare one in *Agrocybe cylindracea* which is currently growing inside the old Willow stump near the North Bridge.

Conclusion

To conclude, over the past year the group has, I believe, made some significant advances in the establishment of Brook Meadow as a valuable community asset and as an important nature reserve. The meadow is looking much better after just two annual cuts. We have more flowers and butterflies. The river is clean and there are plenty of fish and Water Voles. We have a seat and will soon have a picnic table. We have two splendid information boards and

we are keeping the meadow relatively clean and free of litter. We have had good community involvement with about 40% more members and some well-attended public events. We have also had children's groups in the meadow. But we still have a long way to go. Too many people still do not know anything about Brook Meadow and children and families are still a fairly rare sight in the meadow. But I am sure we are getting there.

Brian Fellows (Chairman), 11 Bridge Road, Emsworth, PO10 7QU.

**THE BROOK MEADOW CONSERVATION GROUP
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 9th October, 2003**

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT - 2003

I am very pleased to report on yet another successful year for the Brook Meadow Conservation Group. Following on from the good work of previous years we have continued to improve the environment of Brook Meadow for the benefit of both people and wildlife. Although we have not done a formal visitor survey this year I am sure that more people than ever using the meadow and they are caring for it. We have also made an important first step in promoting Brook Meadow as an educational resource with our very first formal school visit. I shall now go over in more detail the work of the group and its achievements over the past year.

COMMITTEE WORK

The Committee have met every month throughout the year, usually at Ted Aylett's house, and we thank him and Penny for their hospitality. Thanks also to Wally Osborne for keeping the Minutes so immaculately and to Frances Jannaway (formerly Frances Brettell) for her careful handling of financial and membership matters.

Sadly, Ted Aylett, Graham Ault and Debi Saunders have decided not to stand for re-election to the Committee, so we shall need to elect three new members later this meeting. Ted Aylett was a founder member of the group and we are very grateful to him for his many contributions over the past 3 years and, in particular, for looking after our growing collection of tools. Graham Ault has been our "river man", regularly donning his waders to plunge into the icy waters of the Ems to retrieve pallets, wheels and other all the other rubbish that gets thrown into the river. Many thanks to him and to Debi for their various contributions to the group over the past year.

At this time last year the group was in the process of applying for charitable status, but we had no idea then what a prolonged and tortuous process it would be. However, at long last, we have received positive news from the Charity Commission that the Group will be accepted for Charitable Status, subject to concluding a licence agreement with Havant Borough Council to manage Brook Meadow and making a few minor changes to our constitution. Wally will give more details about these later. We shall be asking you to ratify the revised Constitution later in the meeting.

Another issue the committee has been pursuing doggedly during the past year has been to get Brook Meadow included in the Chichester Harbour Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. To us, it makes no ecological sense for the AONB to finish at the A259 road, which means that while Slipper Millpond is included, both Brook Meadow and Peter Pond are excluded. Inclusion in the area would give Brook Meadow extra protection and is worth pursuing, though it is clearly a long shot. Wally has already written letters to various authorities including the Chichester Harbour Conservancy, English Nature and the South Downs National Park, but all have been consistently negative about our chances of getting included. We have now been passed onto the Countryside Agency. Nothing tried nothing gained, I suppose.

In October last year John Carter from the Park Wood Conservation Group helped us to map Brook Meadow using a Trimble GPS surveyor. Frances has all the results on her computer

and is able to print off detailed maps of the meadow and its features for use in wildlife surveys and management plans.

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

I know Frances will be giving you the current membership picture later, but I could not resist breaking the news that membership of the Brook Meadow Conservation Group has increased by an astonishing 68% over the past year from 149 to the present 250. This exceeded our wildest expectations, our initial target last year being a modest 200. This clearly shows the magnificent level of support the conservation project receives from the local community, a support which is vital if we are to protect this lovely meadow for future generations.

Now, we just need to get all these members to renew their subscriptions, as well as attract new members. A reasonable target for the coming year might be 300, but in the light of this year's experience maybe we should go for 350 or even 400? The basic subscription has been left at £3 per person, since we don't want to deter anyone from joining.

As before, we have kept all members fully informed about the work of the group either with bi-monthly printed Newsletters or weekly news updates by e-mail. Currently about 140 members and other people receive the weekly e-mails and numbers are rising as more and more people venture into cyberspace. A number of people have mentioned how much they appreciate receiving these messages to start their week on a Monday morning (one of these being our MP David Willetts).

Talking of the World Wide Web, the Brook Meadow Conservation Group now has its own web site which is regularly updated with news and photographs of group activities and wildlife seen on the meadow. <http://www.hants.org.uk/brook-meadow/>

INFORMATION BOARDS ETC

An important way of disseminating information about the work of the conservation group is through the signcases which are updated monthly with news and photographs of group activities and current wildlife. In March of this year a third Metroguard Signcase was installed near the south entrance to Brook Meadow to supplement the two already in place at the north and east entrances. Each signcase also displays a Code of Conduct notice outlining the responsibilities of visitors to care for the meadow. People are often seen reading the displays and I am sure they are much appreciated by visitors to Brook Meadow. When I am passing I usually tuck in a couple of membership leaflets in the frame and they are always taken.

We are also working on a permanent "Welcome to Brook Meadow" interpretation board to be sited in Palmer's Road Car Park. Local artist Marion Forster is doing the artwork, the centre piece of which will be a map of Brook Meadow, surrounded by illustrations of the more common birds, butterflies, insects, flowers and trees. The board is not intended to be an identification guide, but simply an attractive picture welcoming visitors to the meadow. We should then be able to use the artwork for further boards.

You may already have noticed that two signposts have been erected in Emsworth directing people towards Brook Meadow. These were put up by Havant Borough Council and partly financed by the group. We shall be pressing for more in the future.

WORKDAYS AND GUIDED WALKS

Group workdays have taken place twice a month throughout the year, weather permitting. Activities involved clearing vegetation, keeping paths clear, clearing rubbish from the streams, litter picking and any other reasonable activity as required. Special thanks should go to our regulars who turn up on most workdays, in particular, Pat and Graham Walsgrove, Jill Meesom, David Search, Graham Ault and Penny Aylett.

On Saturday April 12 Pete Roberts of the BTCV organised a special Step Construction Course during which 14 volunteers constructed two sets of steps and a ramp from the raised path down onto the meadow itself. Another set of steps was also constructed by Council workers. All these have been a great success and are being very well used.

Guided walks through Brook Meadow took place each month (except when I forgot). They were very leisurely with lots of stops to look for and listen for birds, insects and plants. The walks were not always that well attended, but those that did come were always very keen and interested in the variety of wildlife to be seen and heard on the meadow.

GROUP EVENTS

Our contribution to Havant Borough Council's 'Paint the Town Red' festival was an Environmental Art and Nature Hunt on Sunday May 18th. We had three gazebos and tents festooned with red and green balloons, and soft drinks and biscuits were served. Events included the traditional nature hunt plus willow weaving, a wishing tree and leaf print making. We counted 164 visitors all of whom received a Brook Meadow sticker, though I suspect some people slipped in without a sticker! All visitors appeared to enjoy the events. It was especially pleasing to see so many families with young children enjoying the meadow and its wildlife. Thanks to all the volunteers who helped man the stalls and guide the visitors, and specially to Frances who organised the whole event so successfully.

We had a great day at the Emsworth Show on August Bank Holiday Monday. Our gazebo was erected with the usual displays of photographs of the meadow and its wildlife and for the first time we had photos on sale of a Water Vole and views of the meadow. We had a steady stream of visitors throughout the day and, I noticed in contrast to previous years, that most people knew where Brook Meadow was. If nothing else, we have helped to put Brook Meadow on the local map. A big thank you to all the volunteers who helped to man the stall during the day and again especially to Frances for organising the stall and many other things.

CHILDREN ON BROOK MEADOW

On Saturday 8 February we were delighted to have another visit from Sally Church and the Havant Branch of Wildlife Watch for a conservation exercise. Wildlife Watch is the junior section of the Hampshire Wildlife Trust and this was their second visit to Brook Meadow. Another visit is planned for early next year. The children and their parents helped to clear dead vegetation and enjoyed making a large bonfire to get rid of the rubbish.

The long-awaited visit of children and parents from Northern Parade School in Portsmouth took place on Friday 4th July. The weather was fine and everyone had a great day out. Two gazebos and a refreshment tent were erected with wildlife photographs and literature on display. Activities included a plant hunt, a conservation activity, tree and grass identification and a "wishing tree". Again, a special thanks to all those who worked so hard to make the day such a great success, in particular, to Wally and Rosemary Osborne. We received a very nice letter of thanks from the school. Hopefully, this will be the first of many such educational events bringing children into the meadow.

WALKS AND VISITS

In June and July, for the second year running, Steve Taylor from the Medicine Garden in Emsworth led two Herb Walks through the meadow. We hope these popular walks will continue in the coming year.

During the year, we have received several visits to Brook Meadow from conservation groups including the Havant Wildlife Group, the Sussex Wildlife Trust and the Hampshire Wildlife Trust.

LITTER AND VANDALISM

The group are determined to keep control over litter and we monitor Brook Meadow on an almost daily basis to keep it clear. The Council's litter man also does a good job and I always give him words of encouragement when I meet him.

Although I have not done a formal survey it is my impression that most dog walkers are now clearing up after their dogs and using the dog bins, though there are still some persistent offenders. The Council have been fairly good in clearing the three dog bins, though several times I have had to call them out to clear an overflowing bin. The dog bin at the Lumley entrance has been a special problem, with the council often refusing to acknowledge it as theirs. However, I think the message is getting through.

Generally, vandalism has not been a severe problem in Brook Meadow, except for our poor picnic table which got totally wrecked in an astonishing act of sheer wilful violence in June. The table was a good idea which went badly wrong. Families did use it, but it also became a magnet for crowds of drinking youths and we were not sorry to see the back of it.

Thankfully, apart from a little graffiti the seat has remained untouched, though it does attract parties of youths, on Friday and Saturday evenings, and clearing up vodka bottles and beer cans has been a regular job. Fingers crossed, the three signcases have remained fairly free from damage apart from markings on one of the windows which we are replacing. The pedestrian gate post at the Lumley entrance was wrenched out, but it was rotten anyway and has now been replaced. The main gate post at the Lumley entrance has also been replaced and we are now able to remove it for our cutting contractor to get his machines through.

I am in regular touch with our two local beat bobbies who are aware of Brook Meadow's problems. They urge us to use the police number 0845-045-4545 to report any incidents.

MANAGEMENT OF BROOK MEADOW

This year, we were very pleased to welcome Clare Bishop of the Hampshire Wildlife Trust as our new management advisor, to replace Debbie Miller. Clare has made several visits to the meadow to discuss its future management with members of the group and she has recently sent us a comprehensive document on the second phase of habitat restoration for our consideration. There are three main areas for management, grassland, woodland and waterways.

The key feature of the grassland management is the removal of each annual year's growth, to reduce the nutrients in the soil and to discourage the growth of coarse vegetation. Over the past three years, the worst of the rank vegetation has markedly decreased with more grasses and wild flowers taking over. This year, on Clare's suggestion, part of the main meadow was cut earlier than usual, to reduce the dominance of certain tall coarse grasses, with the remainder being cut in September.

This year, we were very fortunate not only with the weather, but also in finding a new contractor in Simon Walter who was not only prepared to cut the meadow, but also to remove all the cuttings from the site. Previously, we had to pile them up around the edges with the danger of them catching fire, as happened last year. Simon was also a lot cheaper than the previous contractor.

Simon also managed to cut the South Meadow, which had not been touched in previous years. This is a problem area, very fertile and much loved by bindweed and nettles. Simon's suggestion was to kill off the existing vegetation and sow a wild flower meadow, but this was thrown out by the experts. Another idea is to create a wetland with a boardwalk through it. This is the sort of project that could attract funding, though there are problems to it.

Brook Meadow is surrounded by woodland which is very good for wildlife, particularly birds. There are no special plans to do anything with it, though Andy Skeet of Havant Borough Council will be carrying out some selective pruning of the old Crack Willows where they create a hazard for walkers.

The waterways which flank Brook Meadow are regularly monitored by the conservation group and are looking better than ever this year, but the Ems attracts a lot of rubbish and to stop this we would like to put a fence behind Palmer's Road Industrial Units. We have yet to convince the owners of this, but we are working on them.

In early August the Environment Agency did their annual clearance of vegetation from the river and its banks. We consulted with them beforehand and, with conservation of Water Voles in mind, got them to cut only one bank, as they did last year, and to leave some in-channel plant growth as cover and food for the Water Voles. They did a good job, but for one bank that was inadvertently strimmed by an inexperienced worker. They have put in place procedures to ensure this does not happen again.

WILDLIFE ON BROOK MEADOW

Although we have not done a formal Water Vole survey this year, there have been far more sightings, though this is no doubt partly due to people's awareness and confidence in reporting. If nothing else, I think we have educated people to recognise the Water Vole as a valuable feature of local wildlife and, importantly, to distinguish it from the Brown Rat.

The bird list for Brook Meadow currently stands at 59 species with 39 recorded so far this year. This is about the same as in previous years, so we are doing nothing wrong. I think about 16 species nested, mainly in the wooded areas around the meadow. Our three regular summer visitors, Whitethroat, Blackcap and Chiffchaff, all arrived on time in similar numbers to previous years. At least three Song Thrushes were singing in the spring and, for the first time, a pair of Mistle Thrushes were also about, but I am not sure where they nested. Great Spotted Woodpeckers have been regular visitors and Mallard, Moorhen, Kingfisher, Little Egret and Grey Wagtail were frequent visitors to the river, plus an occasional Grey Heron.

It has been a very good summer for butterflies and 22 species have been recorded on Brook Meadow, which is one more than last year. The most common were Small Tortoiseshell, Small White, Speckled Wood and Red Admiral and the rarest were Small Copper, Small Blue, Marbled White and Clouded Yellow. We had our usual, but all too brief, visit from a couple of Ringlets in June.

We have not managed anywhere near a full survey of the other insects on Brook Meadow, but a large variety have been recorded, the most common being Ladybirds, Banded Demoiselles, Common Darters, Soldier Beetles and Garden Spiders. If I had to pick an insect of the year it would have to be the *Araneus quadratus* spider which clings tenaciously to your clothes and poses very nicely for photographs.

Mammals seen on the meadow this year included Roe Deer, Red Fox, Common Mole, Common Shrew, Field Vole, Brown Rat and Grey Squirrel, though I do not claim this to be in any way a complete list.

For the first time, we have been able to add bats to the wildlife list of Brook Meadow, thanks to Martin Love of the Bat Conservation Trust who visited us in July. Martin found four species of bats flying around the river and kindly provided us with details of a bat detector which we have subsequently purchased. I hope to get Martin over again for another session next year.

The two waterways have been full of fish with Brown Trout, Eels, Flounder and Grey Mullet the most common. Several Slow worms have been reported.

We have a limited number of fungi on Brook Meadow, but what we lack in numbers we make up for in quality. I am referring to the rare *Agrocybe cylindracea* mushrooms which regularly come up in two old willow stumps. Not only are they rare, but are also very good to eat. I do not publicise their locations, but if anyone is interested I can show them where they grow.

A major objective over the past three years has been to assemble a list of all the plants growing on Brook Meadow and year by year the list continues to grow. This year, for the first time, we have added 23 mosses and liverworts to the list thanks to Rod Stern of the British Bryological

Society. This takes the grand total of plants recorded on Brook Meadow to an amazing 278. The list includes 170 herbaceous plants, 37 trees and shrubs, 29 grasses, 13 sedges, 5 rushes and 1 horsetail. There are 7 old meadow indicators. The list also includes several garden escapes and the one we are keeping a careful eye on is Japanese Knotweed, which is currently confined to the west bank of the River Ems.

CONCLUSION

Well, it has been a busy year for the Brook Meadow Conservation Group, but things have gone very well and I can confidently report that we are still on track in our project to promote the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment of Brook Meadow. In just three years of management the meadow has been transformed from an overgrown and intimidating wilderness into a pleasant and friendly open space where people feel free to walk and enjoy the pleasures of the natural environment. We have certainly come a long way in a short time, but the road ahead is long and, not without its problems. However, our guiding vision remains, as it was when we started the project three years ago, that Brook Meadow, with proper care and management, can be both a valuable resource for the people of Emsworth and an important reserve for wildlife.

Brian Fellows (Chairman), 11 Bridge Road, Emsworth, PO10 7QU.

THE BROOK MEADOW CONSERVATION GROUP

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 5th October, 2004

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT - 2004

It gives me great pleasure to report on yet another very successful year for the Brook Meadow Conservation Group.

GROUP NEWS

Membership

Membership has continued to grow over the past year and our target of 300 members was reached by July. Molly Williamson was the lucky 300th member and she was presented with a framed copy of Marian Forster's painting for the interpretation board. With renewals and new members already flowing in, I feel fairly confident in setting a target of 350 for the coming year. The real importance of these numbers is that they demonstrate, unequivocally, the growing support in the local community for the conservation project, a support which is vital if we are to continue to care for and protect this meadow for future generations.

News and information

As always, it has been our policy to keep everyone fully informed about what is happening on Brook Meadow. All members either receive a printed Newsletter every 2 months, or a news bulletin by e-mail. At least, they did until the last couple of weeks when a problem developed with the multiple postings being blocked by my server. I shall need to sort this out for next week's postings. These missives also go to a number of other interested persons at Havant Borough Council, Hampshire Wildlife Trust, etc. In addition, the whole wide world can keep up-to-date with news from Brook Meadow through the Group web site, which is updated weekly with news and photographs - <http://www.hants.org.uk/brook-meadow/>

Workdays

Group workdays have taken place twice a month throughout the year, with attendances usually ranging between 6 and 12. Regular activities involved keeping paths clear, clearing rubbish from the river, tending to new tree plantings, litter picking and any other reasonable activity as required. Recently, due to the uncertainty over getting a contractor to cut the meadow, we have made a start on cutting and raking parts of the grassland, which is a very big job. We cannot expect to do it all, but we thought it worthwhile to cut certain areas. Doing it this way might not be such a bad thing since it produces a mosaic of habitats, some cut some uncut.

Guided Walks

Sadly, my monthly guided nature walks have not been very well attended, to the extent that I considered suspending them. However, I did have four very keen people at the last one which is encouraging.

The Committee

The Committee of 8 elected members has met every month throughout the year. We have not achieved everything we had hoped for, and there have been problems along the way, but we have worked harmoniously as a team and I am delighted to see that 7 of the 8 committee members have agreed to stand for re-election for another year. Unfortunately, Helen Hitchens has had to stand down from the committee, owing to increased family commitments. We thank Helen very much for her help and support over the past year. Now, we really do need another nomination to replace her.

Charity Commission

One of the issues the committee has been struggling with over the past year has been our application for charitable status. This has now been going on for over two years, with endless delays and vacillation from the Charities Commission. Now, we have decided to follow the example of another conservation group in Yorkshire, who have managed to get charitable status, by broadening our objectives beyond Brook Meadow, to include other wildlife areas in the Emsworth. This could include the Interbridges Site which is currently threatened with development. More on this later. The application forms are being filled-in yet again and further changes have been made to our Constitution, which we hope to ratify at this meeting. But, this will be the last time.

Interpretation boards and signs

We now have two magnificent interpretation boards, one in Palmer's Road Car Park and the other at the end of Seagull Lane. These boards feature the beautiful artwork which the group commissioned from local artist, Marian Forster. The boards have been praised by many people, including local naturalist Ralph Hollins, who says they are the best he has seen on any reserve. These static interpretation boards are backed up by three 'dynamic' information boards, sited at the entrances to Brook Meadow. These signcases are up-dated regularly with news and photographs of the group's work and the wildlife that can be seen on the meadow. In addition, we now have three new signposts in the village, directing people to Brook Meadow, plus wooden signs (hand-carved by Graham Walsgrove) at each of the three entrances.

Emsworth Museum

The Brook Meadow Conservation Group has been invited to mount an exhibition in the Rudkin Room of Emsworth Museum for 5 weeks in the spring of next year. Marian Forster's original painting for the interpretation board will be on display in the exhibition.

Marian's painting will remain in the museum after the end of the exhibition, for we have decided to donate the picture to the museum who will put it on permanent public display. We felt that this was the appropriate place for such a lovely work of art and would enable as many people as possible to see it. Marian herself agrees fully with the decision. Meanwhile A4 prints and framed copies of the picture are on sale.

Other publicity

The group has publicised its activities to the wider community in a number of ways during the past year. For example, our display boards have been set up at all our group events together with the green information leaflets with a membership application form. Copies of the leaflet are also put on the signcases. Recently, our resident carpenter, Graham Walsgrove, has made a leaflet box fixed to the signcase at the south gate to keep the leaflets dry. During the past year we have also published a full colour visitor's guide to the wildlife of Brook Meadow, which features Marian Forster's artwork.

We have also had some good publicity in The Ems and The Portsmouth News and there are four pages of text and photographs in the new Emsworth Cookbook. Earlier in the year, I gave a talk to the Wesley Guild at Emsworth Methodist Church.

Children and Brook Meadow

One of the main objectives of the group has been to get schools involved in the meadow, and this year we were delighted to have two school visits. On 16th June we welcomed pupils and teachers from Glenwood School in Emsworth and then on 25th June over 40 pupils, parents and teachers from Northern Parade School in Portsmouth made a return full day visit to Brook Meadow, following their visit last year. A range of educational events were put on for both schools, including a nature hunt, grass and tree identification, a river flow exercise and, of course, the ever-popular, 'wishing tree'. However, as much as we like schools coming they are hard work and I think two visits per year is probably all we can manage.

Another annual event for young children, which Frances organises, is the Autumnal Art Workshops in which children make masks and lanterns decorated with leaves and flowers collected from Brook Meadow. This year's workshops will be held in the Community Centre on 25th October. We also had two visits from children of the local Watch Group, during one of which they planted a hedge of 50 Hawthorn saplings.

Group events

Our contribution to the Havant Borough Arts Festival this year was a "Wildlife Funday" for which a variety of art and wildlife activities were put on for all the family, including willow weaving, animal sculpture, wildlife painting, a wishing tree and a nature hunt.

An amazing 255 people attended the Funday, which is a dramatic increase on last year's figure of 160. Most of the visitors were families with young children. A special thanks to Frances and Richard Jannaway for organising the day's activities.

Steve Taylor of the Emsworth Medicine Garden led two of his highly popular herb walks. Both were well attended and we hope Steve will be repeating the experiences next year.

The Emsworth Show

As usual, the Brook Meadow Conservation Group had a stall at the Emsworth Show on August Bank Holiday Monday. We had a steady flow of visitors, including a number of children who enjoyed the identification and colouring activities that had been arranged for them. Many thanks, particularly, to Pat Walsgrove and Frances for organising the event and to the many volunteers who helped to man the stall during the day.

Visitor Survey

On Saturday 25th of September 7 volunteers carried out a visitor survey in Brook Meadow from 8am to 6pm. Despite very poor weather on the day, Wally reports that 100 visitors were counted coming through the meadow over the 10 hours. This compares favourably with the previous survey, on a fine day in July 2002, when we counted 109 visitors in 12 hours. This result supports our impressions that more people than ever are using the meadow.

MANAGEMENT NEWS

Management Plan

Last year Clare Bishop of the Hampshire Wildlife Trust became our new management advisor and prepared a comprehensive document on the second phase of habitat restoration for Brook Meadow. Unfortunately, Clare has left the Wildlife Trust, leaving us without an advisor. But Frances has taken up the reigns and is currently developing a detailed management plan for Brook Meadow, based on a set of 10 ideal management objectives. Meanwhile, we hope to continue with the key element in the management of the grassland, which is the removal of the annual year's growth.

The Annual Cutting of Brook Meadow

We have had problems with the annual cut this year, since Simon Walter, who did such a good job for us last year, had to call off at the last moment. We also drew a blank with Woodmancote Agricultural Contractors who initially gave us some hope and then, Brian Cull, who did the first two cuts for us, said he was also too busy. However, Brian's son may be able to come over for a day in October with his machine which both cuts and collects.

In the meantime, as I have already mentioned, we have made a start by cutting part of the meadow ourselves during workdays. Ben Spraggon came over to help on the last workday with his machine, but the big problem, is not so much with cutting, but with raking and removing the cuttings. We are having to pile them up around the edges of the meadow, so we need to keep a careful eye on them to prevent another spontaneous fire, like the one we had a couple of years ago.

Environment Agency river clearance

The annual clearance of the River Ems by the Environment Agency went off with barely a hitch. In June, four officers from the Agency came over to Brook Meadow to discuss how the clearance should be done and it was agreed to cut one bank only, leaving a fringe of vegetation as food and cover for the Water Voles. The work was completed in mid September by two very obliging workers, though they had not been told about leaving the fringe of vegetation, and one area had been cut by the time I arrived on the scene. However, their boss, Chris Smith, assures me this will not happen again next year. Regarding the Japanese Knotweed that is growing on the west bank of the river, Chris said he would be dealing with it before it spreads any further.

Tree management

Following the violent storms in June, a number of our old Crack Willow trees suffered damage. Those that fell in the river were dealt with by the Environment Agency. The others were all removed by Havant Borough Council contractors this morning. We are only allowed to tackle small branches. The very tall Willow in the far north-east corner was pollarded earlier in the year on safety grounds. It is sprouting again quite nicely, making one think that pollarding might be a suitable policy for many of these aging trees. The cut timber has to be well hidden, or it gets thrown into the river, which frequently occurred this year.

Sadly, we have lost all but 8 of 30 Alder Buckthorn saplings planted a couple of years ago. But the remaining ones look healthy and currently have red berries. Several new trees have been planted on Brook Meadow during the past year which also are doing well, and Frances has recently ordered three Black Poplars, a very scarce native tree, which will be planted in memory of her mother, who died earlier this year.

Re-surfacing the paths

The biggest job undertaken by the group this year was the re-surfacing of the main paths, which I am sure is greatly appreciated by regular users of Brook Meadow. Pete Roberts of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers supervised the 22 volunteers on the day, during which an astonishing 30 tons of path gravel was laid. Indispensable help was provided by Jane Noble and Ben Spraggon and our thanks to them.

We were also pleased to have the help of local MP David Willetts for about an hour, during which time David managed to scratch his chin, for which Pat Walsgrove administered first aid. Again, a special thanks to Frances for organising the work on this day. Some paths have yet to be laid and we hope to complete the work sometime next year.

Fencing the west bank

Another problem we have been tackling over the past year is how to prevent, or, at least, discourage, people from using the river bank behind the Palmer's Road Industrial Units, as a path. This is a sensitive area, since Water Voles nest here and their burrows can be easily damaged by people walking along the bank. After much correspondence with the owners of the industrial site we finally gave up trying to get a fence put across the back of the units and instead erected a short fence at the other end of the river bank where people have been coming down. We intend planting Hawthorns at the back of the fence to make it more of a barrier, and also plan to have a signcase here with information about Water Voles and the need to protect their habitat. The new fence is also rather nice to lean on, with good views across the river and the meadow.

Litter

Litter is an ongoing problem towards which we have a zero tolerance, clearing it as soon as it appears. We are very fortunate to have a band of unsung, and largely anonymous volunteers,

who take it upon themselves to pick litter on the meadow on a daily basis. To them, many thanks. In addition, Pat and Graham Walsgrove do a regular clearance of rubbish and other debris from the river. Everyone I meet comments on how clean the river is looking these days. Our Council litter man, Sid, also does a very good job in keeping the litter bins emptied. We missed him severely when he went on holiday.

We also need to keep an eye on Tesco's trolleys, which are lined up invitingly outside their new store in North Street. I found one dumped in the river recently and had to ask the manager to remove it.

As for dog mess, I think things are improving, but there remain some persistent offenders who I suppose will never learn. In the meantime, we are still waiting for a replacement for the dog bin at the south entrance, which was vandalised some months ago, despite many requests to the Council. With the nearby litter bin being increasingly being used for dog bags, this is not a nice way to enter Brook Meadow. However, following considerable badgering on my part, the Council have finally admitted that the dog bin at the Lumley entrance is their responsibility, and they are clearing it.

Vandalism

With regards to vandalism and rowdy behaviour, I think we have had fewer problems this year, though the large gatherings of youngsters in Palmer's Road Copse, with drink and probably drugs, remains an unresolved issue.

We have actually asked Havant Borough Council to remove the badly vandalised seat from Palmer's Road Copse, where these youngsters gather. The warden of Meadow Court, a sheltered housing development for the elderly overlooking the car park, is also concerned with disturbance to her residents. Our local beat bobby, Nick Humphreys, is well aware of the problem and does what he can to control it. Nick has also initiated a scheme in Emsworth to restrict the sale of alcohol to young people and is pursuing the extension of the outdoor drinking ban, which currently covers parts of Emsworth, to the whole ward.

Interbridges Site development

Along with many other local people the group is concerned over the proposed industrial development on the small area of land to the east of New Brighton Road between the A27 and the railway line called the Interbridges Site. This is only yards away from Brook Meadow and is a haven of wildlife with a wonderful array of wild flowers. Clearly, with the threat of global warming, it is imperative to hang on to these green areas, however small and apparently insignificant. The good turn out at last week's public meeting in Emsworth clearly indicates a strong local opposition to the development. As a group, we have offered to help in the management of the site, if the proposed development does not go ahead, but I am not terribly optimistic that this will happen.

WILDLIFE NEWS

Mammals

Water Voles have caused us some concern this year. There have been far fewer sightings than in previous years and so we asked the Hampshire Wildlife Trust to come and investigate. Chris Giles duly came, did a survey, and pronounced the good news that there was plenty of evidence for a strong and healthy Water Vole population all along the river. Chris also found no signs of Mink which could seriously endanger the Water Voles if they were present.

Other mammals seen on Brook Meadow include the occasional Roe Deer and Red Foxes. Moles are abundant as seen from their mounds and recently a Weasel was spotted on a tree. I went out a couple of times in the evening this summer with the bat detector and certainly heard Pipistrelles and possibly a Daubenton's around the river.

Birds

The bird list for Brook Meadow currently stands at 62 species, with 46 being recorded so far this year, which is slightly up on last year. About 16 species nested, mainly in the wooded areas around the meadow, including all three of our regular summer visitors, Whitethroat, Blackcap and Chiffchaff. Great Spotted Woodpeckers are regular visitors, but do not nest on the site. On the river the blue flash of a Kingfisher is a regular sight along with Grey Heron, Little Egret and Grey Wagtail.

A Water Rail turned up on the Lumley Stream in early February for the second year running. And a Cuckoo was heard calling from the Lumley area. Or was it just Fred Portwin playing tricks?

Insects

It has been an average year for butterflies on Brook Meadow, with 20 species recorded. Most frequent were Small Tortoiseshell, Speckled Wood, Comma, Red Admiral and all three Whites. Meadow Browns and Gatekeepers were very numerous for several weeks in the summer, when Skippers were also prominent. But, the best butterfly of the year was the Essex Skipper discovered by Martin Harvey during an invertebrates survey. Small Copper and Common Blue have had a good year, but numbers of Painted Ladies were down. A Ringlet made its usual, but very brief, visit to the meadow in July.

Of the other insects, the very lovely Banded Demoiselles have been common all summer and currently, there are some super dragonflies to be seen around the waterways. For a full list of insects we await the results of the invertebrates survey carried out in early July, at our invitation, by Martin Harvey from the Hampshire Wildlife Trust. Martin was impressed with the variety of habitats on Brook Meadow, surprisingly, with the overgrown South Meadow being singled out as a particularly rich nectar source for insects.

Plants

Each year we try to list all the plants growing on Brook Meadow. We do not manage to find everything and this year's total so far is 220, out of a grand total of 260. However, all 13 sedges have been found together 6 of the 7 old meadow indicators. It was a good year for Butterbur with 434 flower spikes counted in April and its huge leaves are currently a prominent feature in the meadow. It was also the best year we have had for Ragged Robin with 114 plants counted in May. Those two very large umbellifers, Hogweed and Wild Angelica, have dominated the meadow during the summer, and the remnants of these very tall plants can still be seen. Currently, the meadow is adorned with the attractive flowers of Michaelmas Daisies. The Bullrushes in the river have flowered for the first time in my memory, producing those brown sausage-shaped spikes. All the grasses seemed to have done well, as have the sedges.

Other wildlife

As usual, Brown Trout have been a source of interest in the River Ems and locals can often be seen feeding them scraps of bread from the south bridge. Eels and Grey Mullet are also seen, but less expected this year were a Goldfish, a Lesser Spotted Dogfish and a full grown Salmon, though both of the latter were quite dead.

As in previous years, not many fungi were found, but for the rare and highly edible *Agrocybe cylindracea*, which regularly sprouted in old willow stumps.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it has been another very busy and successful year for the Brook Meadow Conservation Group, and I can confidently report that we are still on track in our project to promote the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment of Brook Meadow. In just four years of management the meadow has been transformed from an overgrown and intimidating wilderness into a pleasant and friendly open space where people can feel free to walk and enjoy the pleasures of the natural environment. We have certainly come a long way in a short time, but the road ahead is long and, not without its problems. However, our guiding vision remains, as it was when we started the project four years ago, that Brook Meadow, with proper care and management, can be both a valuable resource for the people of Emsworth, and an important reserve for wildlife.

A SPECIAL THANKS

Finally, there are several people who have made significant contributions to the success of the group over the past year who deserve a special thank you. Notably, Frances Jannaway who, in addition to handling the accounts and the membership list, has been the driving force behind most of the group events. Thanks also to Wally Osborne for his impeccable committee minutes and for organising school visits and the visitor survey. Thanks also to Tony Wilkinson

for his resolution and perseverance in dealing with the charities commission application. And, what would we do without Pat and Graham Walsgrove? Despite not living in Emsworth, they have been the mainstays of most of the workdays and many of the group events in the meadow, as well as keeping the river so clean. Many thanks also to all those volunteers who regularly turn up for workdays and other group events without whose help we could not continue. Thank you Ted and Penny Aylett for looking after our tools and to Fred and Ruth Portwin for looking after the power scythe. Finally, we must thank the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, Hampshire Wildlife Trust and Havant Borough Council for their continued support of this conservation project.

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BROOK MEADOW CONSERVATION GROUP ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 11th October, 2005

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT - 2005

GROUP NEWS

I am pleased to report on another highly successful year for the Brook Meadow Conservation Group.

Membership

Membership has soared over the past year and we reached last year's target of 350 without difficulty and, in fact, passed the 400 mark a couple of weeks ago. So, now, maybe we should be looking towards 450 as a target for the coming year, or even 500.

The Committee

There was one change in the committee during the year. Tony Wilkinson left and I would like to thank him for his many contributions, particularly for helping to prepare our application for charity registration. We were delighted that Jennifer Rye agreed to join the committee as a co-opted member. All current members will be standing for re-election.

News and information

As always, it has been our policy to make sure that everyone is kept fully informed about what is happening on Brook Meadow. Members received either a weekly e-mail bulletin, or a bimonthly printed newsletter. At the last count 187 people get the weekly e-mails. We have also had good publicity in the local press and in The Ems.

Visitors to Brook Meadow are able to read about the group's activities in the signcases at each of the three entrances. Membership forms and the Visitor's Guide to the Wildlife of Brook Meadow are also available in the leaflet boxes attached to the signcases. This year a fourth signcase was added to provide information specifically about the Water Voles.

We are also on the internet and the group web site is updated weekly with news, reports and photographs of all the group's activities and wildlife observations.

Relationship with Havant Borough Council

I am pleased to say that our relationship with Havant Borough Council has improved greatly over the past year, thanks mainly to the creation of their Open Spaces Development Team, led by Freda Devonshire. We are now working together for the benefit of Brook Meadow. Most importantly, the Council agreed to take responsibility for the annual cutting of the meadow, a job we previously had to find a contractor to do.

Local Nature Reserve status

The most exciting development of the year was the proposal to make Brook Meadow a Local Nature Reserve. Such a designation would not only raise the ecological status of Brook Meadow, but also provide it with extra protection for the future. The Council are very keen for

this to go ahead. And we already have much in place to support the case, including a management plan, wildlife surveys and community involvement.

Concerning the future of Brook Meadow, we have been reassured by Andrew Case, Estates Manager of Havant Borough Council that there is currently no intention on the part of the Council to develop Brook Meadow for housing or industrial purposes and that it is unlikely to come forward for development in the future.

Charitable status

As for our application for charitable status, no progress has been made over the past year, and we have decided to put it on hold until our application for a Local Nature Reserve has gone through, which should make the situation easier.

Safety Plan

The group are very aware of health and safety issues on Brook Meadow, but not until this year have we had a proper safety plan. Now we do have one thanks to Graham Walsgrove. Graham's plan covers all the various activities of the conservation group, including practical work, group events, school visits and off-site events, with risk assessment procedures and forms for everything.

MANAGEMENT NEWS

Annual cut

The annual cut of the grassland is the key part of the management of Brook Meadow, and this year's cut was carried out in two stages by the Council. All went very well apart from a scare at the end when I noticed smoke coming from the piles of cuttings. This was caused by the vegetation being collected and piled while it was still wet. Jean and I had to rush over to the meadow to break up the piles. I think they are now safe, though this was a concern in view of the fire we had on the meadow a couple of years ago. Ideally, we would like all cuttings removed from the site, and this is an issue we shall need to raise again with the Council.

River clearance

The River Ems got its annual cut and clearance by the Environment Agency in early August. They left a strip near the edge of the river as cover for the Water Voles, but did not clear as much of the in-channel vegetation as we would have hoped, so we had to ask them to come back and remove some more. This is an astonishing turn around from a few years ago when they used to come and clear everything in sight. We shall need to have early discussions with the Environment Agency next year to get the balance right.

Tree management

Tree management on Brook Meadow is mainly undertaken by the Council, especially when large branches are involved. We keep an eye on the trees and alert the Council's tree officer, Andy Skeet, to any that need his attention. We have also agreed with Andy a plan for the progressive pollarding of the Crack Willows, which are old and very fragile. Pollarding will both prolong the lives of the trees and make them safer and more attractive.

Group work

Most of the other management work on Brook Meadow is undertaken by the Conservation Group, mainly during workdays, which are held twice a month throughout the year. Frances has developed a useful work schedule of the jobs to be done each month of the year. These include, clearing areas not included in the annual cut, cutting of casual paths, tending to newly planted trees, coppicing and trimming trees, keeping the river clear and generally keeping the place reasonably tidy. The power scythe has been busy this year and we have replaced the cutting blades for the first time.

Re-surfacing the paths

The most demanding job carried out by the group this year was the re-surfacing of the main paths through the meadow, completing the work which was started last year. The paths are now all in good condition and should not need further work for some years. A special thanks

must go to all the hard-working volunteers on the day, to Ben Spraggon for bringing his mini-digger again and to Peter Johnn from Hampshire County Council for supervising the work.

New Tree Plantings

A number of new trees have been planted in the past year. 20 Rowan saplings were donated by the Havant Wildlife Group in memory of Gwynne Johnson. In fact, we had to plant a second lot of Rowans, since most of the first lot were nibbled off by deer. The new ones were protected with tubes and are growing very well. Of the 3 Black Poplars donated by Frances in memory of her mother, two are doing well but one will have to be moved. Finally, 15 Alder Buckthorns were donated by Linda Randall in memory of her mother who used to live in Lumley Road; they were planted below the causeway alongside those surviving from an earlier planting some years ago, and all are doing well.

Water Vole Protection

This year we have taken positive steps to protect the west bank of the river behind the Palmer's Road industrial units from its use as a pathway. This is an area where Water Vole burrows are close to the surface and are easily damaged by walkers. To deter people getting onto the river bank we have erected a wooden fence at the top of the bank and reinforced it with Hawthorn saplings. This fence is actually quite a nice feature and affords fine views of the river and the meadow. There has been no serious access onto the river bank this summer, so I think we have solved the problem. A Metroguard signcase has also been installed alongside the fence to provide information about the Water Voles and the importance of protecting their river bank habitat.

The Lumley sluice gate

Of relevance to Water Vole protection is the Lumley sluice gate, about which there has been much discussion over the past year. The sluice controls the amount of water going into the Lumley Stream and the River Ems, but is in poor condition. Good news is that the issue has been resolved and a new gate will be installed and controlled by the Environment Agency.

LITTER AND VANDALISM

Litter

Litter is an ongoing, but fairly minor, problem on Brook Meadow, but we maintain a zero tolerance by clearing it as soon as it appears. I must thank those regular walkers, like Dave Lee, who regularly pick up litter from the meadow. Sid, the Council litter man, as always, does a very good job in keeping the litter bins emptied.

Dog mess

Dog mess is a more serious problem, since it is not just unpleasant, but is also a health hazard. Although there are doggie bins at the three entrances to Brook Meadow, they are not always used. The problem came to a head a few weeks ago when we received a distressing e-mail from a lady who told us that the clothes of many young children had been soiled with dogs' excrement during a school trip to Brook Meadow. This is of special concern with school visits on the increase. As a volunteer conservation group we are doing what we can, but ultimately responsibility for the enforcement of the law lies with the local council. We have written to the Council, alerting them to the problem.

Vandalism

Vandalism on Brook Meadow has been relatively minor this year. Graham's leaflet boxes have been a special target and he has already replaced two of them, but one is still missing. Fortunately the signcases themselves remain relatively free from damage. The window of the interpretation board at the end of Seagull Lane has been slashed, but the knife did not penetrate the perspex, so that is OK for the time being. The most recent act of vandalism has been the firing of the dog bin at the south gate and the Council have been informed and asked to replace it.

The vandalised commemorative plaque on the north bridge has been replaced by Mr Graham Alderson. However, the group agreed to meet the cost of the new plaque.

With regards to rowdy behaviour, my impression is that there have been fewer problems this year. The removal of the notorious 'drinking seat' in Palmer's Road Copse has certainly improved that area. I think the constant flow of visitors through the meadow also helps. Police surveillance on Brook Meadow has been minimal over the past year. Nick Humphreys, who was the Emsworth Police Community Officer, has moved on and has only recently been replaced by WPC Lisa Jones whom we hope will start to take interest in Brook Meadow.

GROUP EVENTS

School Visits

We are always pleased to welcome schools to Brook Meadow and this year we had visits from all three Emsworth schools, with the usual mixture of educational and fun activities laid on for them. We were also very pleased to have a return visit from Northern Parade Junior School, who thoroughly enjoyed their day on the meadow and, I believe, have already booked their place for next year. Bob Collins from the City of Portsmouth Boys School also brought two groups of his students to Brook Meadow to carry out surveys of the River Ems for their project work. I am sure there have also been other school visits that we did not know about.

Exhibition in Emsworth Museum

In the spring we were delighted to be invited by Emsworth Museum to mount an exhibition in the Rudkin Room which we called "Brook Meadow Through the Ages". It was opened by David Willetts and had a variety of wildlife displays and historical research documents. The exhibition was well received and had a total of 320 visitors. Thanks to all those volunteers who manned the exhibition.

Marian Forster's original painting

At the opening of the exhibition Marian Forster's original painting for the interpretation board was formally donated to the Museum. We have copied the painting onto disk and, after consulting Marian, it was decided that the museum was the most appropriate place for this lovely work of art to be displayed.

History of Brook Meadow booklet

At the end of last year the group was left a legacy of £5,000 by Mrs Anne Conway of Slipper Road, a lady who was well known for her interest in local wildlife. After much discussion, we decided to put the money towards the publication of a booklet on the history of Brook Meadow dedicated to Mrs Conway. This will be based on historical material prepared by Frances for the Museum exhibition. We plan to have the booklet published in time for next year's Emsworth Show.

Wildlife Funday on Brook Meadow

The biggest group event of the year was certainly the 4th annual Wildlife Funday, which was a great success, attracting an astonishing 460 visitors, mainly families with children. Each visitor had a sticker so we knew how many came in. There were lots of exciting things going on, including willow weaving, animal sculptures, music and song sessions, story-telling, stars for the wishing tree and a nature hunt and nature trail. Many thanks to the 22 volunteers who helped out during a rewarding day.

Emsworth Show

For the 5th year running the Group had a stall at the annual Emsworth Show on Bank Holiday Monday. We had a steady flow of visitors throughout the day. Frances had interesting conversations with local residents, whose memories will no doubt contribute to the booklet on the history of Brook Meadow.

Autumn Art Workshops

The Autumn Art Workshops led by Jo Tester is an annual event designed specifically for young children. Last year's workshops were fully booked and the children all had a great time (as did the helpers). This year's workshops will be held on Monday 24 October.

Herb Walks

During the summer, Steve Taylor, the local herbalist from The Medicine Garden, returned to Brook Meadow for a couple of his popular story-telling sessions.

Ems Valley Walks

In August the group was invited to take part in the Hampshire Water Festival, for which two walks were organised, one led by Frances and the other by myself, covering the Ems valley from the harbour to Westbourne, both with a bit of history and a bit of wildlife. They were well attended and the feedback very positive. We have agreed to take part next year.

Visitor Survey

Despite the poor weather on the day, the results from this year's visitor survey show a continuing increase in the number of people visiting the meadow, with numbers up to 134 from 100 last year.

WILDLIFE REVIEW

Water Voles

Our Water Voles continue to delight locals and visitors alike. Although we have not conducted a formal survey this year, I logged a total of 50 sightings reported to me from the beginning of March to the end of June. As in previous years, the sightings were from 4 main areas along the river, suggesting the presence of at least 4 pairs of Water Voles.

Moles

Apart from the occasional Roe Deer and Red Fox not many mammals are seen on Brook Meadow. However, we do have one very active, but rarely seen, mammal, in the Common Mole. Molehills were all over the meadow in January and February of this year, so I decided to do some counts. On one occasion in February, I counted an astonishing 1,110 fresh molehills in 21 distinct clusters - suggesting the presence of least 21 active moles on Brook Meadow.

Birds

It has been a fairly average year for birds on Brook Meadow with a total of 50 species recorded. There was nothing special or new to add to the overall list which remains at 65 species. Our three summer visitors, Whitethroat, Chiffchaff and Blackcap were present in similar numbers to previous years. All the resident birds seemed to be active during the season. A pair of Mistle Thrushes provided particularly nice views with two youngsters in a nest below the south bridge.

Insects

It has been a fairly poor year for butterflies, with only 17 species recorded on Brook Meadow, though I believe this trend was general for the local area. There were plenty of Whites, Meadow Browns and Gatekeepers during the summer, but no sign of Clouded Yellow, Small Copper, Painted Lady or Ringlet. Speckled Woods and Commas were good, along with Holly and Common Blues and there has been a recent glut of Red Admirals on the Ivy flowers. Of the other insects, the lovely Banded Demoiselles have been prominent as have dragonflies such as, Common Darter and Southern Hawker.

Invertebrate Survey 2004

Our knowledge of the insects of Brook Meadow has been considerably enhanced this year as a result of a couple professional surveys commissioned by the group. The first survey was conducted in July last year by Martin Harvey of the Hampshire Wildlife Trust, but we only recently received his report. The survey discovered a total of 83 invertebrates on the meadow, including 2 which were "nationally scarce". Martin also provided us with some valuable advice on habitat management, which we are following. He concluded his report with these encouraging words: "Overall, Brook Meadow fulfils a valuable role in supporting biodiversity in the heart of Emsworth. As management develops, the site has great potential to increase in interest and to support a more distinctive community of wetland, grassland and woodland invertebrates".

River Ems Survey

Another survey, this time focusing on the River Ems, was conducted in June by Andy Powling and Chloe Delgery from the University of Portsmouth. Their report runs to 30 pages and gives details of a multitude of plants and invertebrates discovered at 7 sites along the river. Interestingly, they used the findings to compute a biological index of water quality, which they say was relatively good considering the river has run through farmland and gardens, where it would pick up organic pollution.

Moth Survey

To celebrate National Moth Night on July 9, John Langmaid and Ian Thirlwell from Portsmouth, accompanied by Mark Young from Aberdeen, paid a return visit to Brook Meadow to carry out another moth survey – they did one in May last year. Over 60 species of moths were recorded during the evening, including one rarity called a Festoon.

David Search

Our own David Search also carried out a research project on Brook Meadow for his degree work, which involved placing about 30 insect traps at strategic points around the meadow. I wonder if he managed to find them all? Anyway, we look forward to seeing the results of David's work, which will also add to our increasing knowledge of the wildlife of Brook Meadow.

Plant survey

We have also had a plant survey on Brook Meadow this year, carried out by Martin Rand, who is the Botanical Recorder for South Hampshire. As a result of Martin's visit the Brook Meadow plant list has expanded considerably and now stands at a grand total of 310 species.

Generally, Martin was impressed with the range of plants on the meadow, though he had some stern words to say about the overgrown areas where the more delicate plants are seriously threatened. This could account for the poor showing of Ragged Robin and some of the sedges this year. We are giving these areas special attention in the management plan.

One interesting new plant that Martin found was a non-stinging nettle, called Fen Nettle *Urtica Galeopsifolia*, which is usually thought only to grow on Wicken Fen in Cambridgeshire. News of this plant attracted Gillian Edom, a Nettle expert from Chichester Harbour Conservancy. Unfortunately, we could not locate the Nettle on her visit, but by way of compensation, Gillian had an excellent view of a Water Vole, which was her first ever sighting.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this has certainly been another incredibly busy and successful year for the Brook Meadow Conservation Group. The group itself has gone from strength to strength and I think we have continued improve the physical and natural environment of Brook Meadow for the benefit of both people and wildlife. In just 5 years, the meadow has been transformed from an overgrown and intimidating wilderness into a pleasant and friendly open space, where people can feel free to walk and enjoy the pleasures of the natural environment. Our guiding vision remains, as it was when we started the project, that Brook Meadow, with proper care and management, can become both a valuable amenity for the people of Emsworth, and an important reserve for wildlife.

A SPECIAL THANKS

Finally, there are many people who have made significant contributions to the success of the group over the past year who deserve thanks. Firstly, Frances Jannaway who, in addition to handling the accounts and membership so efficiently, has been the driving force behind most of the group events. Frances has also been working on a management plan for Brook Meadow which will form the basis of our application for Local Nature Reserve status. Thanks also to Wally Osborne for his impeccable committee minutes throughout the year and for organising the visit of Northern Parade School and the visitor survey. A special thanks also to Pat and Graham Walsgrove for their many valuable contributions to the efficient running of the group and for doing such a good job in keeping the river running well. Thanks also to the many volunteers who regularly turned up for workdays and other group events. Thank you also Ted and Penny Aylett for looking after our tools and thank you Fred and Ruth Portwin for looking after the power scythe, and Fred for fitting the new cutting blade. Finally, we acknowledge the

continuing support of BTCV, the Hampshire Wildlife Trust and Havant Borough Council for this conservation project.

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**BROOK MEADOW CONSERVATION GROUP
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 3rd October, 2006**

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT - 2006

My retirement

As you will all know, I have decided to stand down from the post of Chairman. After 6 years at the helm, and not getting any younger, I think it is time for me to pass on the reigns to someone younger and fitter, to carry on the good work. However, I shall certainly not be deserting the group and will continue to support and work for it, mainly on the wildlife side. I shall have my regular mooches around the meadow, as I have done for the past 6 years, recording what I find there. In fact, the meadow has almost become my back garden and I know and love it a great deal. I shall continue to keep lists of birds, butterflies, plants, and other wildlife that I find there. I shall also continue to provide nature notes for the printed Newsletters and for the fortnightly e-mail bulletins; I shall update the 4 signcases and maintain the group's web site. So, as you can see, I shall be kept fairly busy.

The Group

The group has certainly made tremendous strides over the past 6 years and I am pleased to be leaving it in very good health. We have an excellent committee and I would like to thank all of them for their hard work and support over the past 6 years. In particular, I would like to single out Wally Osborne for his meticulous committee minutes (and for his expert handling of the strimmer) and Frances Jannaway for her tireless work not only as Treasurer and Membership Secretary, but also for all the other contributions she makes to the running of the group. I must also thank Graham Walsgrove for developing a safety plan, which any self-respecting conservation group cannot be without these days, and Jennifer Rye for adopting the role of school liaison officer. And, of course, one must not forget the hard core of diligent volunteers, who turn out regularly on workdays to keep the meadow in such good shape.

Membership

As for membership, well this has simply exploded over the past few years, beyond our wildest expectations. For the last 2 years it has topped 400 members which, I am sure is the envy, of most other conservation groups. It is a clear indication of the great local support that there is for the conservation project. So long may it prosper. The group is also financially secure thanks to grants, subscriptions and generous donations, and some very tidy accounting from our Treasurer.

Development

The meadow itself seems to be fairly secure now from development, though I suppose one can never say that for sure. However, Havant Borough Council, the owners of the site, have assured us there are no plans for development, and have given their full support to the conservation project. They have also placed Brook Meadow on the Local Plan as a protected green space. Let's hope they keep to their word, for it would be criminal to let such a lovely area go under the bulldozers.

Havant Borough Council

Communication with the local Council has sometimes been difficult in the past, but has improved greatly over the past couple of years with the formation of the Open Spaces Development Team, with whom we have regular meetings. Many thanks here to Freda Devonshire, Rob Hill, Nick Hammond and Andy Skeet for their continuing support. I think one

can now safely say that the Council and the Conservation Group are working together for the benefit of Brook Meadow.

Local Nature Reserve

A particularly exciting development, which I have been pleased to see almost to fruition, has been the designation of Brook Meadow as a Local Nature Reserve. I say "almost", since although the Council's Executive have formally approved the status, English Nature (or whatever that body is now called) will need to rubber stamp it. This will make Brook Meadow only the second Local Nature Reserve in the Borough. This designation will, I trust, provide an extra level of protection against any threat of development. I should add that the group recently received formal acknowledgement of its work in involving the community in nature conservation with a "Certificate of Excellence" award in the Borough in Bloom competition.

Management

One important step in acquiring Local Nature Reserve status was the development of a comprehensive Management Plan, for which we must thank Frances Jannaway. This lays out, in some detail, all aspects of the management of the grassland, river and woodland on the site for the next 10 years.

The annual cut remains the key feature in the management of the grassland of Brook Meadow. After many years of dithering, the Council have accepted full responsibility for both the cutting of the meadow and, importantly, the removal of the cuttings from the site. There were a few problems with this year's cut, which had to be re-done by our old friend Martin Cull, but we trust they will be resolved in the coming years. One only has to think back to what the meadow used to look like 6 years ago, a wild, overgrown and intimidating place, dominated by 6 foot high Great Willowherb, to appreciate the value of proper management.

As for the river, this gets an annual clearance from the Environment Agency, though the amount the Agency clears is now carefully controlled in order not to disturb the resident population of Water Voles.

Tree management

Although the grassland of Brook Meadow is getting better the same cannot be said for the trees. Sadly, most of our lovely Crack Willows are fast outgrowing their strength and Andy Skeet, the Council's tree officer, has been kept busy clearing fallen trees and branches. Since there is also a public safety issue here, Andy has set in motion a plan to pollard many of the Willows on the site. The ones he has already done have sprouted well and are looking good. However, it is important for wildlife and, in particular, Bats that a good number are left in situ.

Public use of Brook Meadow

The general improvement of Brook Meadow over the past 6 years has, of course, led to its increased use by the public and one rarely goes onto the meadow these days without seeing people walking through, usually with dogs. The visitor survey in July this year counted an astonishing 240 people and 83 dogs passing through the meadow in a single day. Spread over the year, this adds up to a staggering 87,000 people and 30,000 dogs using the meadow each year. While it is good to see so many people using the meadow, this does create problems for a nature reserve.

Impact on wildlife

One obvious problem is the adverse impact it could have on wildlife, particularly on small mammals and nesting birds. Maybe it is coincidental, but I have had no sightings of mammals reported to me this year, apart from Water Voles and Moles, and even these are well down on previous years. However, I have seen a Kestrel twice this week around the Lumley area, so maybe it knows something we do not. As for birds, I have no direct evidence about nesting, but there have been fewer Whitethroat on the meadow this year and one or two other absences. Whether or not there is actually any direct impact of public usage on wildlife, I believe the balance between community use and conservation is an issue which the group need to keep in mind when planning events and publicity in the future. Is it really in the best interests of Brook Meadow, the nature reserve, to encourage more usage? Is there too much publicity for Brook Meadow? By keeping paths cut, and in good order, is the meadow becoming too inviting?

Dog mess

Another, more visible, problem of increased public usage is dog mess, which appears to be on the increase. I must admit my heart sinks when I am confronted by one pile after another, as I do my regular mooch around the meadow. In the hope of raising awareness of this problem, Jennifer Rye organised an excellent poo-poster competition, in which local school children were asked to create posters encouraging dog walkers to clean up.

St James School and Glenwood School submitted lots of very creative and humorous posters for which the children received well deserved prizes. A selection of these posters is displayed in the three signcases. Unfortunately, the poster which was put up near a dog bin was quickly vandalised. Let's hope the posters have some positive effect though, frankly, I am not optimistic.

Vandalism

On the other side of the coin, increased public usage means more watching eyes and less wanton vandalism. Although there have been several acts of vandalism on Brook Meadow over the past year, particularly to the newly erected wooden fences, it does seem to be less than in previous years. There have also been noticeably fewer gatherings of rowdy youths, though the removal of the notorious "drinking seat" in Palmer's Road Copse has certainly contributed to this.

Group Events

As usual, the conservation group has been very active in organising events on the meadow this past year. These have included school visits from Northern Parade Junior School and Glenwood School and visits from the local Watch Group and the Southbourne Sea Scouts. But, the biggest event by far was May Day on Brook Meadow, which this year attracted over 1,000 visitors. There was also, the annual Autumn Workshops for children and the group had the usual stall at the Emsworth Show. Praiseworthy as these events are, I believe the group needs to be cautious about taking on too much, since the work is increasingly falling on the shoulders of a small band of volunteers. I believe we need to keep in mind the primary aim of the group, as set out in our original objectives, which was to protect and conserve the environment and wildlife of Brook Meadow for the quiet enjoyment of the public.

WILDLIFE REVIEW

Water Voles

I am afraid this has not been a good year for our Water Voles, with very few sightings being reported to me. Last year, I logged a total of 50 Water Vole sightings, but this year I have only had 18 sightings reported to me. I am fairly sure this is not due to people not reporting sightings, since many people have expressed disappointment in not seeing any Water Voles at all. I have consulted Graham Roberts (of Hampshire Wildlife Trust) about this decline. He said there are always seasonal fluctuations in Water Vole numbers (a bit like lemmings) which can not always be explained and from surveys done all over Hampshire some areas showed increases, whereas others showed decreases. The conservation group has taken several measures over the past couple of years to protect the habitat of the Water Voles with fences, dead hedging and notices. However, since our Water Vole population is such a small one it is very vulnerable, so we shall just have to keep our fingers crossed that we have not lost them for good.

Birds

There was nothing special in the way of bird news on Brook Meadow this year. Of the summer visitors, Whitethroat numbers were down, though Blackcap and Chiffchaff were about average. Of the resident birds, all seem to be OK, though there are a few gaps in the year list. Great Spotted Woodpecker was less prominent than usual and Mistle Thrush totally absent. A pair of Mistle Thrush nested near the south bridge last year, but they have not been seen this year. The star bird of the year was probably the very friendly Robin which used to perch on the handrail of the south bridge, to the delight of passers by. One bit of late news, two Buzzards were soaring over the meadow this afternoon, for the first time this year, probably straying from Stansted Forest.

Butterflies

It has generally been an average year for butterflies on Brook Meadow, though there was a flood of Meadow Browns and Gatekeepers in July. Commas and Red Admirals have been fairly common, but Peacocks and Painted Ladies were down on Brook Meadow, despite their abundance elsewhere. Sadly, Small Tortoiseshells have had another bad year generally, with only a couple of sightings on the meadow in late April.

Common and Holly Blues have done well, but there has been no Ringlet this year as far as I am aware.

Other insects

Of the other insects that I recorded, Banded Demoiselles were particularly numerous in July, when I counted at least 10 on one occasion around the Branched Bur-reed. Of the Dragonflies, Common Darters were abundant (and still are) and Emperor and Southern and Migrant Hawkers were also seen.

David Search carried out his degree research project on ground-dwelling insects on Brook Meadow, for which he was awarded a special prize. David found 20 species of ground beetle and 15 species of rove beetle and hopefully will be writing a summary of his findings soon for the group's web site (hint, hint).

Plants

Botanically, it has been a good year on Brook Meadow with the discovery of several new plants, including our very first orchid, a Common Spotted, and several plants of Yellow Rattle. We have had much advice from Martin Rand, the BSBI Recorder for South Hampshire, on various matters and I would like to record my thanks to him for his continuing support. The jury is still out on the stingless nettle (*Urtica galeopsifolia*) which Martin found here last year, though our local nettle expert Gillian Edom is working on it. A more ominous discovery was a rather fine Cannabis plant which I was advised by Martin to pull up and dispose of to save any embarrassment.

It was a bumper year for Ragged Robin with at least 332 flowering plants and a good year also for Butterbur. However, Hemlock Water-dropwort got some bad press simply for being what it is, ie poisonous, but I hope this will not lead to any over zealous action against this rather fine native plant, or any others that people take a dislike to.

The total plant list for Brook Meadow grows year by year.

Currently the list stands at 324 different species, which is an increase of 14 since this time last year.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this has been another successful year for the Brook Meadow Conservation Group and the prospects for the future look very good, with the Local Nature Reserve a particularly exciting development. Some thorny issues lie ahead, particularly on the balance between community use and conservation, but I am confident the group with the co-operation of local people can and will resolve them successfully. So, all I have to say, is farewell and fare forward. And good luck!

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